DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 271 CS 012 428

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TITLE Negotiating Literate Actions through Discourse: Teacher as Participant/Observer.
PUB DATE Apr 95
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 18-22, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Research; Drama; Ethnography; Grade 6; *Group Discussion; *Group Dynamics; Intermediate Grades; Participant Observation; Peer Influence; *Peer Relationship; Playwriting; *Reader Response; Self Directed Groups; Short Stories; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Discourse Communities; *Response to Literature

ABSTRACT

A study explored how small groups of student readers interacted in a classroom over time to interpret short stories assigned by a teacher who functioned as participant/observer. The study focused on multiple readers in actual classroom situations to consider the relationship between the social and academic elements observable during day-to-day classroom life. The purpose of the investigation was to describe the nature of reader response as it took place in two small, ongoing task groups in school when the teacher did not intervene in group discussion. Study design emerged from the question, "What happens when groups of sixth graders meet over time to read and discuss a short story for the purpose of reconstructing and performing it as a play?" For 6 weeks, eight student volunteers met in two separate discussion groups to read, discuss, rewrite, and perform a short story as a play. Data were collected using an ethnographic system. During the first 2 days, the researcher participated in the role of teacher. During the remaining 4 she acted as an observer, viewing the group through a video camera. Results made visible the relationship between the academic and social nature of classroom task accomplishment. In group 1, one or two people dominated; talk was used to constrain group academic accomplishment. In group 2, talk was used to construct roles and relationships that supported group accomplishment. (Appendixes contain author's story, episodic text analysis, and tables of data.) (TB)

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American Educational Research Association
Annual Conference
San Francisco, 1995

Session: Negotiating Literate Actions through Discourse: Teacher and Student Construction of Class as Group

Chair: Carol Dixon, University of California, Santa Barbara
Discussant: Judith Green, University of California, Santa Barbara

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NEGOTIATING LITERATE ACTIONS THROUGH DISCOURSE: TEACHER AS PARTICIPANT/OBSERVER

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This study explored the question of how small groups of student readers interacted in a classroom over time to interpret short stories assigned by a teacher when the teacher was a participant/observer. It was designed to focus on multiple readers in actual classroom situations in order to consider the relationship among the social and academic elements observable during day to day classroom life. The purpose of the investigation was to describe the nature of reader response as it took place in two small, ongoing task groups in school when the teacher did not intervene in group discussion. Study design emerged from the question, "What happens when small groups of sixth graders meet over time to read and discuss an assigned short story for the purpose of reconstructing and performing it as a play?"

METHOD

For six weeks, eight sixth grade volunteers met on consecutive Fridays in two separate face to face discussion groups to read, discuss, rewrite and perform a short story as a play. Groups met during reading period in a schoolroom that had been reserved for this study. Two groups of two girls and two boys each were selected from two sixth grade cohorts.

Data were collected using an ethnographic system in which the researcher functions as a participant/observer in the research (Spradley, 1980). During the first two days, I participated in the role of teacher/researcher to frame the project. During the remaining four days, I acted as observer, viewing the group through a video camera. At this time, I performed administrative work, such as getting supplies and scheduling the stage for play rehearsal and performance. Participants in each group took over the task of interpreting, rewriting, and presenting their play.

Primary data were the transcripts of participant talk recorded during the five planning days and during performance. On the first level of analysis, transcripts of five days of classroom talk were analyzed in conversational units. For this analysis, a discourse system was adapted from an interactional sociolinguistic method developed for mapping conversations that occur in the context of school classrooms (Green & Wallat, 1979, 1981). On the second level of analyis, conversational units were analyzed for social interaction patterns using the questions "Who? can say What? to Whom? under what circumstances? and With what outcomes?" These questions are based in research showing that contexts are created by, and are a part of unfolding conversations (Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz, 1976; Erickson & Schultz, 1981).

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Group Activity, Days 1-6

During their first meeting, participants in Groups 1 and 2 silently read six assigned short stories. At the second meeting, they discussed and chose the story they would dramatize. Both groups chose the same story, "The Dinner Party," by Mona Gardner (Appendix A). During instruction on this day, interpretive discussion and performance were framed to include elements of student responsibility for task, the nature of text-reader relationship, and rhetorical analysis of literary text.

During the next three days, participants in each group took over the responsibility for producing their performances, functioning without an instructor except when they needed administrative help (such as scheduling the stage for their performance day). On the last day, participants in both groups presented their completed performance texts.

Comparative analysis of discourse used to frame task showed that frame elements were presented to Group 1 and Group 2 in similar ways (Appendix B). Comparative analysis of activity by phase and by time spent by the Group 1 and Group 2 over the first five days showed close pattern similarity between the two groups at this level (Appendix C). Participants in Groups A and B had been given similar task frames and had spent about the same amount of time in approximately the same kinds of activity over the five days. In this way, they can be said to have experienced common story texts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Study results made visible the relationship between academic and social nature of classroom task accomplishment as task groups made meaning using texts of narrative fiction (Bradley, 1994). In Group 1, talk was used to construct social roles and relationships that constrained group academic accomplishment. In Group 2, talk was used to construct roles and relationships that supported group accomplishment. Moreover, the style of social patterns constructed by the spoken interaction in each group was reflected in the style of each group's performance.

ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC NATURES OF ASSIGNED GROUP TASK

The first level of analysis, an episodic content analysis of performance texts (Appendix A), showed that while participants in Group 1 and Group 2 read common story texts and were instructed to frame interpretive task in common ways, the two groups produced performance texts that differed from one another in both structure and content. Group 2's text presented both a coherent story and a logical argument. Group 1's text was incoherent and presented no logical argument. While this first level of analysis showed differences in content and structure between the two texts, it did not show how these differences were produced by Groups 1 and 2.

On the second level, interactional sociolinguistic analysis of transcripts of talk about interpretation over the five planning days showed differences in the social interaction patterns between and among participants in Groups 1 and 2. Group 1's social interaction was characterized by discourse that was monopolized by two people, that excluded other participants, and that left frame clashes unresolved. Group 2's social interaction was characterized by a shared discourse that functioned to resolve frame clashes quickly and without apparent consequence.

A comparison of results of these two levels of analysis showed a relationship between the social and academic nature of accomplishement of group task. The fragmented nature of Group 1's day-to-day social interactions was reflected in and reflected the fragmented nature of the interpretive texts created by Group 1 participants. In contrast, the cohesive nature of Group 2's day-to-day social interactions was reflected in and reflected the coherence in the interpretive texts created by Group 2 participants. In Group 1, participants constructed social roles and relationships that constrained group academic

performance. In Group 2, participants constructed social roles and relationships that supported group academic performance.

A comparison of transcripts of talk in Group 1 and Group 2 on Day 3 of the study will be presented in this session to illustrate how this analysis was made.

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APPENDIX A

Author's Story and

Episodic Analysis of Group Performance Texts

Author's Story Text

The Dinner Party

by Mona Gardner

The country is India. A colonial official and his wife are giving a large dinner party. They are seated with their guests--army officers, government attaches with their wives, and a visiting American naturalist--in their spacious dining room, which has a bare marble floor, open rafters, and wide glass doors opening onto a veranda.

A spirited discussion springs up between a young girl who insists that women have outgrown the jumping-on-a-chair-at-the-sight-of-a-mouse era and a colonel who says that they haven't.

"A woman's unfailing reaction in any crisis," the colonel says, "is to scream. And while a man may feel like it, he has that ounce more of nerve control than a woman has. And that last ounce is what counts."

The American does not join in the argument but watches the other guests. As he looks, he sees a strange expression come over the face of the hostess. She is staring straight ahead, her muscles contracting slightly. With a slight gesture, she summons the native boy standing behind her chair and whispers to him. The boy's eyes widen, and he quickly leaves the room.

Of the guests, none except the American notices this or sees the boy place a bowl of milk on the veranda just outside the open doors.

The American comes to with a start. In India, milk in a bowl means only one thing--bait for a snake. He realizes there must be a cobra in the room. He looks up at the rafters--the likeliest place--but they are bare. Three corners of the room are empty, and in the fourth the servants are waiting to serve the next course. There is only one place left--under the table.

His first impulse is to jump back and warn others, but he knows the commotion would frighten the cobra into striking. He speaks quickly, the tone of his voice so arresting that it sobers everyone.

"I want to know just what control everyone at this table has. I will count to three hundred--that's five minutes--and not one of you is to move a muscle. Those who move will forfeit fifty rupees. Ready!"

The twenty people sit like stone images while he counts. He is saying "two hundred and eighty" when, out of the corner of his eye, he sees the cobra emerge and make for the bowl of milk. Screams ring out as he jumps to slam the veranda doors safely shut.

"You were right, colonel!" the host exclaims. "A man has just shown us an example of perfect control."

"Just a minute," the American says, turning to his hostess. "Mrs. Wynnes, how did you know the cobra was in the room?"

A faint smile lights up the woman's face as she replies. "Because it was crawling across my foot."

Episodic Analysis of Performance Texts, Groups 1 and 2*

[*Key: Indentation signifies dialogue between actors; all other units are narration.]

Group 1, Beginning
001 Sara: this story takes place in the colonels palace in india
002 Sara: the colonels having a dinner party
003 Sara: with his wife a young girl and a visiting american naturalist

Plot: Episode 1
004 Sara: the young girl brings up the controversy about self control
005 Rachel: well i think that women have outgrown the jumping on the chair at the sight of a mouse era
006 Joe: i think that men have one more ounce of control than women have

Episode 2
007 Carlos: i wonder whats taking the cook so long
008 Carlos: i better go check

Episode 3
009 Sara: the visiting american naturalist notices the hostess strange expression
010 Joe: i think that men have one more ounce and that counts

Episode 4
011 Carlos: [clump clump shuffle shuffle] cluck

Episode 5
012 Joe: im gonna count to five hundred nobody move or they must forfeit fifty rupees
013 Joe: one two three four five six seven

Complication: Episode 6
014 Sara: the american notices the servant boy put the bowl of milk on the ground
015 Sara: he knows that could mean only one thing
016 Sara: a snake is in the room
017 Joe: four hundred ninety seven four hundred ninety eight four hundred ninety nine five hundred

Resolution: Episode 7
018 Sara: this man has just shown a perfect example of self control

Episode 8
019 Sara: but how did you know
020 Joe: i saw the expression on the hostess face when i saw the servant boy put the bowl of milk

Episode 9
021 Sara: and how did you know
022 Rachel: it was crawling across my foot

Group 2, Beginning

001 Ted: the country the countrys india
002 Ted: a colonel officer and his wife are having a huge dinner party
003 Ted: the guests are army officers government people and an merican naturalist

Plot: Episode 1

004 Ted: a spirited discussion comes up between a young girl and an army officer
005 Ted: girls cant be in the army
006 Ted: i mean theres too many snakes
007 Ted: girls are scared of snakes
008 Lily: not any more weve outgrown that
009 Ted: its true you women jump on a chair at the sight of a mouse
010 Lily: youre just jealous cuz you have to be in the army

Episode 2

011 Ana: i once knew a girl in the army
012 Ted: i dont care shut up you wimp
013 Ana: dont talk to me like that [smack]
014 Ted: ahhhhgh
015 Ted: ok no more of this discussion at the table

Episode 3

016 Ana: jeeves fetch me a bowl of milk secretly

Complication: Episode 4

017 Ted: the merican knows that a bowl of milk in ind the merican knows that a bowl of milk in india could only mean one thing
018 Ted: bait for a snake
019 Ted: but he looks around and cant even see the snake
020 Ted: it must be under the table
020 Ralph: ahh what i want to know what control there is at this table
021 Ralph: ill count to twenty and not one of you move a muscle
022 Ralph: and if you do youll forfeit fifty rupees fifty dollars
023 Ralph: one two ten twelve furteen fifteen sixteen seventeen eighteen

Episode 5

024 Ted: ahh snake omygosh help ahh no
025 Ralph: calm down man

Resolution: Episode 6

026 Ralph: how did you know there was a snake under the table
027 Ana: because he was crawling across my foot

APPENDIX B

Frame Elements

Table 1

Frame Elements, Day 1, Groups 1 and 2

Frame Elements	Social Structure	Initiator	Group 1	Group 2
1. Read six stories	individual	instructor	x	x
2. Choose one	group	instructor	x	x
3. Rewrite	group	instructor	x	x
4. Act out	group	instructor	x	x
5. Discuss	group	instructor	x	x
6. Take over task	group	instructor	x	x
7. Create meaning, interpret	group	instructor	x	x
8. Change story	group	instructor	x	x
9. Add character	group	instructor	x	x
10. Narrator as character	group	instructor	x	x
11. Costume decision	group	participant	x	
12. Live audience	group	instructor		x

Table 2

Frame Elements, Day 2, Groups 1 and 2

New Frame Elements	Social Structure	Initiator	Group 1	Group 2
1. Interpretation grounded in text	group	instructor	x	x
2. Rhetorical interpretation	group	instructor	x	x
3. Many interpretations	group	instructor	x	x
4. Interpretation is ongoing	group	instructor	x	x
5. Live audience	group	instructor	x	x, Day 1

APPENDIX C

Phases of Group Activity

Phase time described in minutes, Days 1-5, Groups 1&2

Phases of Activity	Day 1		Day 2		Day 3		Day 4		Day 5	
	G1	G2	G1	G2	G1	G2	G1	G2	G1	G2
Pre-session Social	*	*	1	1	*	*	1	1		
Getting Ready to Talk	2	1	1	1						
Talking about Task	4	3	2	1	3	2	2	3		
Getting Ready to Do Task	5	5							11	10
Doing Task	30	32	15	20	23	29	48	51	42	33
Closing	3	3	2	1	3	*	1	4	*	2
Post-session Talk			*							7
Reopening							*			
Doing Task							4			
Reclosing							*			*
Total time spent	44	44	21	24	29	31	56	59	53	52

*less than 1 minute spent